

October 6, 2023

Testimony of the Beaver Valley Intermediate Unit
Dr. Eric G. Rosendale, Executive Director
Joint House Appropriations and Education Committee

Good morning, Representatives Harris, Grove, Schweyer, Topper and honorable members of the Joint Appropriations and Education Committee:

My name is Dr. Eric Rosendale. I am here this morning in my capacity as Executive Director of the Beaver Valley Intermediate Unit. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee this morning. During my remarks I will give a brief overview of Pennsylvania's intermediate units, provide specific examples of how school districts in Beaver County are collaborating and sharing resources to serve students, and finally some of the challenges we face and how they can be addressed in a cost-effective manner.

Every year, thousands of students, educators and adults receive services from one of Pennsylvania's 29 intermediate units, or IUs as they are otherwise known. As public, regional educational service agencies, IUs provide educational, administrative, and technology services to the Commonwealth's school districts, charter and non-public schools.

For more than 50 years, BVIU has served schools and school districts in Beaver County by delivering innovative and cost-effective programs and services that help educators meet the needs of all students. Our programs, such as the center-based school at New Horizon, the Regional Wide Area Network, Behavior Services, English as a Second Language Services, Professional Development Services from the Training and Consultation and Curriculum staffs to name a few, are open to students and staff from across our county, regardless of their school district.

At BVIU, we are fortunate to be in a position where we can witness and participate in these and other collaborative efforts between schools and school districts in our county. I would like to take this time to share some of our successes and challenges as a way to support the legislative effort to advance the educational opportunities for the students across the Commonwealth.

Workforce development and growing the next generation of workers is a top priority. Every year, in cooperation with local school districts, the Beaver County Chamber of Commerce, the Beaver County Community College and business partners from across the region host the Energy & Advanced Manufacturing Partnership (E&) Student Career Event for middle school students. Through featured presentations, interactions with local companies, and hands-on activities, this event helps middle school students gain a better understanding of career and educational paths within STEM related fields. Students also leave the event with an "artifact" that coincides with the PA Department of Education's mandated 339 Plan. STEM jobs, specifically those in the energy and advanced manufacturing industries, continue to grow in our county and region, simultaneously helping to strengthen our economy. It is our goal to ensure these industries have skilled, qualified workers here in Beaver County to fill those jobs.

Another county-wide example of shared services that positively impact the future of our students is the Beaver County Career and Technology Center (BCCTC). The BCCTC recently launched the Diversified Occupations, a one-year instructional program in partnership with business and industry that helps prepare students for their individualized career goal. While students obtain technical knowledge and work skills in a paid experience, the 'soft skills' curriculum such as portfolio development, financial literacy, and other industry standards are taught at BCCTC during in-person instruction. This, on-the-job, compensated work experience is an opportunity for high school seniors to prepare for life after graduation by providing a structured, supervised introduction to work in a specific skilled trade.

But the county's collaboration in the area of workforce development is not confined to traditional areas. In fact, Beaver County school districts are developing new programs that provide career opportunities in new fields.

One such opportunity that has taken off is the Fly Like a Girl Drone Academy. Thanks to a Moonshot Grant from Remake Learning, the Beaver Area and Ambridge Area school districts have taken to the skies to give high school girls from across the region the opportunity to earn a Remote Pilot Airman Certificate. These aspiring pilots attended the academy and learned new skills from a certified drone instructor. This fall, students will sit for the FAA Unmanned Aerial Vehicle 107 license exam. With only 640 certified female remote pilots in the state of PA, these young women are breaking ceilings!

Similarly, the South Side Area School District has developed a partnership with Unmanned Response to develop a comprehensive Unmanned Flight Drone Program in partnership with Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The course allows students to obtain the FAA 107 license and gain real-world unmanned flight training. Upon course completion and successful completion of the FAA 107 exam, students are eligible for entry level unmanned flight piloting in a number of industries such as real estate, agriculture, emergency services, and other industries utilizing aerial photography and drone applications.

In addition to these and other workforce development initiatives, Beaver County has a strong desire to provide a system of support for the mental health of our students. The [Youth Ambassador Program](#) (YAP) is a part of the Beaver County System of Care. YAP is a youth-centered, youth-driven program operating in Beaver County schools that promotes awareness of current issues that youth face today. The goals of the program are:

- To increase awareness of mental health and wellness.
- To decrease the stigma associated with mental illness.
- To promote leadership and self-advocacy among youth.
- To build relationships with other youth in their districts and across the county.

Mentally healthy students are more likely to go to school ready to learn, actively engage in school activities, have supportive and caring connections with adults and young people, use appropriate problem-solving skills, have non-aggressive behaviors, and add to positive school culture. Beaver County Behavioral Health (BCBH) and the BVIU partnered to serve 19 schools and school districts in Beaver County to address social-emotional learning needs through staffing and supplies grants. Furthermore, many of our schools have partnered with mental health providers to offer in-school support, and BVIU, in cooperation with the BCBH, is working to provide additional outpatient services in schools for students as mental health providers struggle to meet the demand for mental health services.

Unfortunately, in this and other instances, BVIU's ability to provide much needed services are curtailed by its inability to own instructional space. Currently, intermediate units cannot own property for instructional purposes, such as schools or classrooms. A minor easement in the current school code would enable IUs across the state to provide more cost-efficient services, especially in small communities and rural areas.

While these examples of collaboration and partnership are encouraging, there are a number of persistent challenges that thwart our educators' best efforts to meet the needs of all students in our county. In meetings with school leaders and other community stakeholders, we consistently hear about facilities that are in need of repair, personnel shortages, funding inequities, and the challenges associated with mandates placed on LEAs.

For Beaver County school districts, facilities funding needs to be a top priority. According to a 2020 study conducted by the Beaver County Partnership, almost all school buildings with graduating classes were constructed between the late 1950's and the late 1970's. These buildings are old and repairs are costly. Significant renovations are expected at most of these buildings within the next five to 10 years. Small and rural communities have a significantly smaller local tax base than their suburban counterparts and must consistently do more with less. Facilities assistance from the state through the PlanCon program is a necessity if rural students are going to compete and succeed in big city, global workforce.

Personnel shortages and support for our top administrators is another area of focus. Teacher shortages have existed for decades, particularly in hard-to-staff subjects like special education, math and science. Now, like many industries, intermediate units and schools are also experiencing shortages of other qualified personnel critical to educating children. Schools across the commonwealth are facing their toughest staffing challenges in recent memory, including teachers and substitute teachers, paraprofessionals, bus drivers, school nurses, mental health professionals and more. Additionally, principal attrition is at an all-time high of 15.4% in Pennsylvania and school boards are experiencing difficulties in finding qualified candidates who are interested in leading the district as the superintendent. While there are current efforts underway to streamline the entry requirements into the education profession, these easements do not trickle up to the top positions of our industry. A start to address these concerns would be to consider modifying language pertaining to the commissioning of superintendents ([Commissioned School Officers pa.gov](https://www.pasde.net/Commissioned-School-Officers)).

As fewer young people enter the education profession, it is also more difficult for school districts to fill back-office positions as well. In many cases, school districts cannot offer competitive wages for business managers, human resource officers, and IT directors as they can command in private industry. As a result, the administrative ranks at school districts are thinner than ever mandates continue to grow. Allow me to provide a very concrete illustration of this growth.

In 1949, when the Pennsylvania School Code was first passed, in its totality, the printed copy was less than one inch thick. When I became executive director of BVIU ten years ago, the state code was two volumes stacking four inches high. Today, the most recent version consists of a three-volume set that is just under six inches, indicating an exponential growth in the requirements with which all districts must comply no matter their size or resource level. So, in this era of historically low staffing both in the classroom and at the administrative ranks, school districts are required to comply with an ever-increasing number of mandates, many of which could be streamlined.

For example, as stated in the Public-School Code, school district personnel are required to participate in mandatory training in a variety of important topics. However, the cumulative impact on time for training, tracking, and management requires school administrators to continually revisit how to provide the mandated training in a thorough and efficient manner. Addressing the number of mandated training hours is essential. Mandated training is time-consuming for school districts, not only for those participating in the training, but also for those responsible for the coordination, management, and tracking of training sessions. There is a layering effect to this legislation as more mandated training hours are being added each year. Currently there are 27 trainings required by law for educators in Pennsylvania, totaling 13 hours. Most recently,

three hours of mandated training required annually were added in 2022 to address School Safety and Security.

There is no question that all of the required training is critically important, but action needs to occur to streamline efforts. In a June 2023 report from the Joint State Government Commission of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, they studied the [training mandates on Pennsylvania Public School entities](#) and shared several recommendations to make the trainings less of a burden, more effective and of greater benefit. The recommendations include providing flexibility to LEAs to determine frequency/recurrence of trainings, removal of hourly requirement in place of content requirements, flexibility in determining who should take the trainings, the development of a council to review current and future training requirements made up of relevant stakeholders, access to trainings are in one place to streamline reference and manageability, and periodic examination and evaluation of the trainings for effectiveness. This will allow school districts to retain a greater local control while still following the state's guidance. It will also alleviate the time spent on tracking and management of hours.

In addition, a variety of chronic funding issues continue to plague school districts of all sizes. Earlier this year, Commonwealth Court Judge Renee Cohn Jubelirer ruled that our state's school funding system must be reformed. And while this is certainly true, deeper systemic issues must also be addressed, preferably with experts sitting at the table. The funding structures and practices surrounding charter school payments are of particular concern and cause of much consternation. As an intermediate unit, BVIU is required to serve both public-school districts and charter schools, two entities which often compete for the same students. And while no one is opposed to school choice, the mechanism through which charter schools are funded is, at best, faulty, and frankly promotes confrontation and animosity.

These and other financial burdens only exacerbate our school districts' difficulties as they seek to hire new staff. As noted above, it is difficult to alleviate debilitating staff shortages when our salaries cannot compete with those found in the public sector. These are extremely complex issues but ones that I believe can be solved so long as those who have specialized knowledge in these key areas are at the table when solutions are being discussed.

The Beaver Valley Intermediate Unit, as one of 29 intermediate units across the state, stands ready to work with members of this Committee and the rest of the Pennsylvania General Assembly to advance the educational opportunities for the students across the Commonwealth. We serve as a connector between schools and their communities, and help ensure that all students, regardless of their zip code, receive a quality public education.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.